

Blogging out of Repression and Passivity, into Democracy and Change

AB09: The Second Arab Bloggers Meeting Dec 8-12 2009

Organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung & Global Voices Online

“Ideas won't go to jail. In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost.”

Alfred Whitney Griswold (1906 – 1963)

The Arab world has witnessed a mushrooming of the blogosphere over the past few years and political blogging¹ is hailed as a major force and vehicle for change and reform in the region. There are skeptics who perhaps justifiably play down the role and impact of the blogosphere due to the fact that blogging is perceived as an elitist activity because the number of illiterate and computer illiterate individuals in the region is still alarmingly high. Even among the literate public, blogs as mediums for information and analysis are frequented only by a few. Hence blogs arguably do not reach out to the masses and consequently do not mirror public opinion.

But even if blogs are incapable of bringing about radical political change, they are still catalysts for political communication, mobilization and activism which was unlikely in the past. They constitute public forums that help average citizens practice and bolster their right to freedom of expression and enhance their argumentative and analytical skills. Frustrated young people in particular have an outlet to vent their opinions and emotions and can navigate in a sphere where they are taken seriously and where tangible results are possible. So blogging, even if it does not have a direct political purpose is still a political phenomenon par excellence.

Blogging has also clearly allowed for more diversity and greater acceptance of plurality, accountability and transparency. Finally, blogging should not be viewed as a barometer for public opinion; political bloggers in the Arab world are often rather dissidents who are trying to make change or simply report on and uncover atrocities and misconduct in their respective countries.

Bloggers versus Regimes

In recent years, Arab regimes are cracking down on bloggers with increasing rigor and ferocity. Although this crackdown is most visible in Egypt, which has the biggest blogosphere, other countries such as Morocco and Syria have also detained and jailed bloggers for online activism. Most Arab states do not have laws specifically regulating the internet (although some like Syria block Facebook and Twitter). However, this has stopped neither internet censorship nor the persecution of bloggers, with security being commonly invoked as justification for restricting free online speech (and press freedom in general). Whether online or offline, Arab regimes seek to control the free flow of information, thus controlling individuals. Bloggers are not only targeted for directly attacking the regime; more often than not, they are arrested for exposing corruption or public mismanagement.

The question is to what extent can regimes resist the march of technology which has revolutionized the way human beings communicate? Regimes undeniably possess seemingly limitless power and means repression which they often use with brutal efficiency against dissent. However, bloggers and online activists have also begun to amass a different and more subtle kind of power. Advances in video and photography technology which have not only made digital cameras and video recorders accessible to lay people, have allowed online activists to document, photograph and record human rights violations, government negligence, police violence and other incidents of daily life, and share them with the vast online community. Once this information is online, it is impossible to

¹ For the rest of this document, the term ‘blogging’ will refer to ‘political blogging’

eliminate or stop it from spreading. Written testimonies and witness accounts are now powerfully augmented with audiovisual documentation and quickly disseminated online.

Thus there is a clash between traditional public mass communication via state newspapers and television which require massive physical infrastructure, and new channels of virtual political mobilization which require minimum physical tools. The former's outreach remains more powerful, but it is sufficiently threatened by online activism to periodically lash out against it.

AB09 – The ‘Unconference’

Nevertheless, there is an essential question that needs to be raised: Under which conditions can blogging be more effective and yield a wider and deeper impact, and what kind of support (if any) does the bloggers scene need from other actors in order to maximize this impact?

This question led the Beirut and Ramallah offices of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (www.boell-meo.org, www.boell-ameo.org) to organize the first Arab Bloggers Meeting in August 2008, which was the first gathering of its kind, bringing together Arab bloggers to exchange experiences. This first meeting aimed to build solidarity in a group facing common difficulties.

Both offices decided to build on the success of the first meeting, by organizing the Second Arab Bloggers Meeting (nicknamed AB09 by the participants), this time in cooperation with Global Voices Online (www.globalvoices.org) in Beirut from the 8th till the 12th of December 2009. Over 50 Arab bloggers from 18 Arab countries were invited to attend the intensive training and networking meeting of young bloggers in the region.

The aim of the 5-day closed meeting was to enable face-to-face exchange, and to coach bloggers on how to leave their imprint on the international blogging sphere, make their voices heard, and to organize online and offline campaigns to pressure governments to stop censorship and restricting freedom of expression. It also aimed at encouraging them to champion the political and cultural rights of women, marginalized communities and ‘other’ minorities (the LGBT community in particular). Finally, the aim of the meeting was to give the bloggers a chance to form solidarity networks.

To make the event truly participatory and instill a sense of common ownership, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and Global Voices eschewed the traditional workshop set-up and instead opted for a barcamp-style-event where apart from a number of fixed presentations, participants chose the topics they wanted to focus on, and were trained by other participants who were experts in that particular field. The result was five days of intense and energetic exchange of expertise and knowledge, and the creation of many linkages and networks.

The ultimate result, in the words of blogger [saudijeans](http://saudijeans.org) was an ‘unconference’:

“Keep in mind that these presentations were just part of the five-day event. The bigger part of the event was made up of many, many concurrent workshops on many different things and given by many people. Anyone who has an experience that she would like to share with others was welcome to stand up and say: “Hey, my name is X and I would like to talk about this!” The meeting mostly took the barcamp format, which made it really fluid and informal. People were free to choose which workshops to attend, and some of the popular workshops had to be repeated or extended.

At the end of the meeting, the organizers invited those who spoke and gave workshops to stand up and the scene was just so inspiring, refreshing, and amazing: the great majority of people in the room was standing up, which means they didn't only come here to listen, but also to share their knowledge with others. Usually in conferences, you have a handful of speakers and hundreds of silent attendees. This was not the case here. The Arab Bloggers Meeting was an Unconference, and a great one at that.”

<http://saudijeans.org/2009/12/17/arab-bloggers->

“There is a lot of work too - as people network and learn from each other, attend one presentation after the other, try to clone themselves to attend as many workshops as they possibly can fit into and continue to have an overwhelming sense of awe and appreciation for all that is happening. Being at such gatherings, meetings that have been put together carefully and where all the participants are genuine, is a humbling experience.”

Amira al Hussein

<http://sillybahrainigirl.blogspot.com/2009/12/from-beirut-with-love.html>

This report, as well as being a document and record on the event, also attempts to capture the mood of this meeting, which produced many unexpected and positive outcomes. As well as relying on traditional workshop reporting, this report also borrows from the reports of the participants themselves: that is, their blogposts, their tweets and their photographs. (Some bloggers wishing to preserve their anonymity requested that we not mention their names or include their photos).

Dozens of training sessions and presentations were held and it is impossible to include all of them in this report. We have instead compiled some of the highlights of the meeting. For those interested in obtaining the full presentations, please contact Doreen Khoury (Heinrich Böll Foundation, Beirut) at boell@terra.net.lb and for training material please contact Sami Ben Gharbia (Global Voices) at samibengharbia@gmail.com.

Please also visit www.arabloggers.com for blogposts on the event and video interviews with the participants.

To blog or not to blog

Noha Atef, Wael Abbas & Jamal Eid



The first question to ask is: Why start a blog? Why not resort to other media of expression? As Egyptian bloggers are widely considered to be the founders of the Arab blogosphere, a session entitled “To blog or not to blog” was appropriately moderated by Egyptian bloggers Wael Abbas and Noha Atef as well as Egyptian human rights activist Jamal Eid. They asked the participants some basic questions:

Why do we blog? What is our purpose? How did we start? What are the main obstacles?

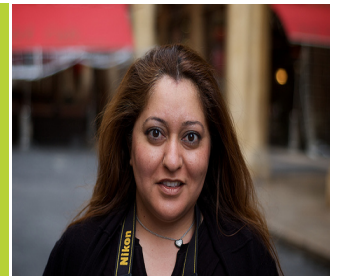
The ensuing discussion revealed that bloggers usually begin with a personal blog, without specific objectives. Writing is first and foremost a means of self-expression. Some bloggers are professional writers, others are not. But blogging quickly becomes a way to express voices often ignored by society and the mainstream media, to fight stereotypes, expose torture or simply give women a voice. Blogging in some cases has led to the creation of communities united by a common purpose and organizing events online is a natural

response on a community level.

However, as bloggers have gained more and more attention, some common issues have also emerged, the issue of anonymity in particular. Many bloggers initially displayed personal information at first (i.e. location, real names, profession, etc.). As a result, some faced security complications with their governments, their social environments, and sometimes even their own families. While some were defiant and refused to conceal their identities, others were forced to remove their blogs and start again with a more intelligent digital identity.

Citizen Journalism: are you a journalist or a blogger?

Amira Al Husseini & Salam Pax



Many debates were also held on a blogger’s identity: Is s/he a blogger or a journalist or both? Iraqi blogger Salam Pax and Global Voices’ Amira Al Hussaini organized a discussion group on “Citizen Journalism: Are you a Journalist or a Blogger?” opening with a debate on objectivity versus subjectivity. One pertinent remark was that perhaps bloggers seem to have more room for subjectivity than reporters do, and this advantage allows bloggers to connect with readers on a more personal level. One participant noted that a blogger’s job is not simply to attack the keyboard, but rather to get a certain message across to his/her readers. To do so, bloggers often use the narrative form.

There was also a heated debate on whether the journalist or the blogger has more liability. Some argued that because reporters get their work reviewed by editors and peers, their work must necessarily be held more accountable. Others argued that proper websites do have editors who review bloggers’ articles, which in this regard makes them similar to reporters. Generally, though, it was agreed that fact-checking is an important and determining factor of credibility for bloggers as well.

The Power of Social Media

Ramsey Tesdell



Several presentations and discussions focused on conceptualizing the internet, and more importantly the power of social media. According to Ramsey Tesdell, co-founder of www.7iber.com, in social media specifically, every individual completes the work of the others in the network in a form of “social intercourse”. Therefore, in order to efficiently utilize social media we need to understand “how people create, distribute, understand and use information”. In a presentation entitled “The Ecology of the Internet”, Ramsey said that we need to move away from the conventional method of studying networks by extrapolation, and replace it with a more holistic approach, examining the network and its interactions as a whole and keeping an eye on cultural components to understand.

We can sum up the components of an ecology by, first of all, acknowledging multiple perspectives and their complexity, valuing interrelationships, and recognizing a dynamic environment. To demonstrate this point, Ramsey gave the Gaza Campaign as an example. The campaign organizers used social media tools to organize fund-raising and their subsequent distribution as well as organizing the network that managed the process.

The campaign was successful in collecting between 50 to 60 tons of food and clothing, which was sent to Gaza with the help of hundreds of volunteers every day, leading to the creation of a network that would outlive the crisis and collaborate for future actions. The campaign also managed to engage a lot of bloggers, tweeters, watwet users, Facebook users, and others, and hence used the new media as an alternative to conventional media for raising awareness and organizing people. The weak point that Ramsey identified however was that the momentum died with the end of the campaign. For future crises, the network can be reactivated, and the same tools can be used again.

“The weak point of the Gaza Campaign was that the momentum died with the end of the campaign.... the connection should have been sustained with the participants.”

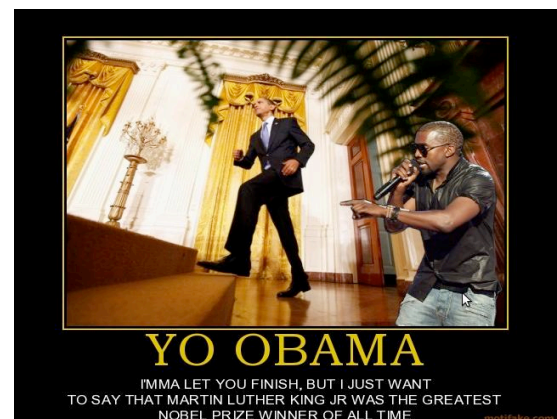
‘Anonymous’ versus Intellectual Property

Slim Amamou



Slim Amamou, an Algerian blogger, argued in his presentation on “The Philosophy of the Internet” that intellectual property is the main enemy of the internet spirit.

Slim defined the internet meme², which is a repetition that spreads online, with a certain degree of variation. One example of memes is the Kanye West meme, when during the Grammy Awards rapper Kanye West interrupted an award winner to declare that he believed that Beyonce's video clip was the best music video. The online community ridiculed West by replicating videos and photos with humorous alternations or ‘mash-ups’. The meme shown below could have never been possible if the creative minds behind it had respected intellectual property, since the picture is a mash-up of Obama's picture (copyrighted), West's image (copyrighted) and the caption which is a variation of West's speech (also copyrighted).



It is fortunate, according to Slim, that users do not always respect copyrights. Most users work online anonymously, they share information and material as “Anonymous”³. Together they have built a huge entity called Anonymous. Anonymous is a powerful being, which does not respect censorship, laws and restrictions.

But according to Slim, Anonymous has one arch-enemy: Intellectual Property. Intellectual Property relentlessly tries to oppress and control Anonymous with laws such as ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement). Slim finds that Intellectual Property represents the “old way of dealing with things” and cannot control Anonymous.

² See <http://thedailymeme.com/what-is-a-meme/>. ³ I.e. instead of using their names, they blog or write under “Anonymous”. ⁴

The Challenges of Blogging in the Arab World

Gamal Eid



If anything, ABO9 emphasized the challenges and risks of blogging and activism in a region known for its poor human rights record. Over the course of the five days, there were countless stories of problems with state security forces which in some cases escalated into criminal charges and court cases.

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (<http://www.anhri.net/en/>), a law firm established in Cairo in October 2003 to defend freedom of opinion and expression, collects and produces reports and studies on human rights violations in the Arab World. It also provides trainings for human rights activists and provides legal support for victims of freedom of speech violations.

As Gamal Eid, director of ANHRI said, “We do not claim neutrality in our work. We always take the side of freedom and our motto is: “Why is free speech taken to the courts? It is important for victims to feel that they have legal support and media coverage.”

“When you are detained, the worst thing that can happen to you is to be forgotten”

Gamal divided Arab governments into three groups according to type of government or regime. First, there are governments protected by strong tyrannical ruling elites such as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya. Dialogue with these regimes is rarely ever useful. Then there are governments who exercise mild tyranny, such as the UAE and Oman, where it can be useful to try dialogue before escalating confrontation with them. Finally there are governments such as Morocco, Lebanon, and Algeria, where governments are fearful of tarnishing their international image and think twice before violating human rights if there is international media attention on a particular case or legal follow-up.

In most Arab countries, however, the Ministry of Interior and the secret police have a strong grip on society. The work and efficiency of ANHRI depends on

 **ifikra** RT @justamira So freaking scary being a blogger in the Arab world. Gamal Eid talking about how dictatorships are dealing with bloggers #ab09
1:53 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from Arabloggers
Retweeted by **basselsafadi** and 1 other

the circumstances of each country, i.e., the level of oppression, judicial independence, and the presence of independent media.

There are various categories of charges leveled against bloggers; Gamal gave the following examples:⁴

1. Libel and slander/defamation:

Egyptian blogger **Tamer** (<http://elhakika.blogspot.com>) wrote about the chemical contamination caused by a company of Manzala Lake in Egypt, and documented his statements by shooting a video onsite. The court ruling against him was severe, and he was ordered to pay 40,000 Egyptian Pounds to the company on charges of slander.

Algerian blogger **Abdul Salam Baroudi** (<http://bilad-13.maktoobblog.com/>) wrote in 2007 a blogpost in which he criticized the cleric in charge of Religious Affairs and Endowments in the Tlemcen district in Algeria, who had issued a decision banning Tlemcen imams from talking to the local radio station. Baroud was taken to court by the cleric for his criticism.

2. Dissemination and promotion of false news or rumors:

Moroccan blogger **Hasan Barhoun**, who works for "Reporters without Borders" and an affiliated YouTube channel, exposed corruption cases including suspicious relationships between politicians and drug mafias. Barhoun also started a petition denouncing corruption which was signed by approximately 60 activists and jurists. Hassan was arrested on February 26, 2009, and tried only 10 days later on March 6, 2009. His lawyers were not allowed to complete their plea. The judge issued a ruling on the same day sentencing Barhoun to 6 months in prison and to pay 5000 Dirhams in penalties.

3. Weakening national sentiment:

Syrian blogger **Karim Arbaji** was arbitrarily arrested in June, 2007. The trial was not held until September, 2009. Karim was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of weakening national sentiment for managing online community forums.

⁴ During his presentation, Gamal included a long list of bloggers jailed for various charges. To obtain this information, please contact boell@terra.net.lb or ANHRI directly at: info@anhri.net.

Syrian blogger **Tariq Biasi** was arrested in July, 2007, following an online comment he made criticizing the Syrian security forces. Tariq was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of "weakening the national sentiment" and "lowering the morale of the nation."

4. Threat to social peace, public order, national unity, or exploiting the democratic climate to try to overthrow the regime (these general accusations are open to interpretation and are therefore frequently used):

Egyptian blogger **Ahmed Mohsen's** house was raided on April 23, 2009, following the events of April 6, 2008, in Egypt.⁵ The police searched his house and threatened to arrest him at work if he did not surrender. He was charged with abusing the democratic climate prevailing in the country to overthrow the regime and of violating the law and the constitution. Ahmed was detained in solitary confinement, provided with only one meal a day, and was denied visits. His arrest warrant was repeatedly renewed until his release on 23 June, 2009.

Egyptian blogger **Mohammed Rifaat** (<http://matabbat.blogspot.com>) was arrested on July 21, 2008, on charges of calling for demonstrations on July 23, insulting state institutions and disrupting public security. Mohammad was acquitted by the prosecutor since there was no mention of the demonstration anywhere to be found on his blog. He was released on August 17, 2008, only to be arrested again under the state of emergency law.

6. Insulting sacred values (religious authority), lack of respect (of kings), or insulting the president of the republic:

Egyptian blogger **Karim Amer** (<http://karam903.blogspot.com/>) was expelled from Al-Azhar University and sentenced to jail for four years: three years for contempt of religion and one year for insulting the president of Egypt. Through his blog, Kareem criticized the discriminatory policies against women in Al-Azhar University in addition to pressure exercised on the senior Al-Azhar sheikh to support the president.

Moroccan blogger **Mohammad El-Rajji** (<http://almassae.maktoobblog.com>) was arrested on charges of "disrespect to the king." Muhammad was sentenced to two years in prison, but an appeal overturned the ruling on September 20, 2008.

Galal Eid says there is a new guide for how to deal with the crime of cursing Arab presidents and kings #ab09
2:09 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from TweetDeck

Galal Eid says Arab governments are stupid and only know the language of power #ab09
2:08 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from TweetDeck

Guides on how to react when arrested for publishing to be released soon by the Arab Network for Human Rights Information #ab09
2:07 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from TweetDeck

These are the main charges leveled against activists. Authorities may for example fabricate cases against activists, or resort to beatings, torture, abduction, or defamation (i.e., dissemination of offensive information about activists) before arresting activists. Authorities may also circumvent the law, arrest activists under the state of emergency law, which exists in several Arab countries, and establish special tribunals to escape accountability. Therefore, the first three days of detention are crucial to determining the fate of the detained blogger or activist.

ANHRI provides legal defense in courts, publicly exposes violations, and launches solidarity campaigns, whether local regional or international. If no action is taken by officials, then ANHRI starts demanding the resignation of officials and exposes human rights violations to the largest audience possible. The objective at this stage is to cause as much hassle as possible to the authorities so that they would prefer to release the detainee rather than attract unwanted attention.

The Arabic Language & Blogging

Ahmad Gharbia & Donatella della Ratta

Interview with Egyptian Blogger Ahmad Gharbia
By David Sasaki • December 14, 2009 • Leave a Comment • Filed in: Interview, Video
Tags: Arabic, Creative Commons, Egypt, Security, Tactical Tech, Technology, Translation



Although not addressed directly during ABO9, the challenge of using the Arabic language in blogging and online social media in general emerged as one of the main issues that participants identified as requiring further attention.

After the meeting, the Italian Donatella Della Ratta, Arab World Media and Development Manager of Creative Commons based in Syria, wrote a blogpost on the power of the Arabic language and advocated for its use more frequently. She writes:

⁵ The 2008 Egyptian general strike took place on 6 April, 2008, by Egyptian workers in response to low wages and rising food prices. 6

“It was the first time for me to attend a truly Panarab grassroots meeting and to be able to listen to it in its original language. I realized the power of this language, Arabic, that -even if spoken in so many different accents and local varieties- can link together people coming from 22 countries and let them share ideas and projects.

It’s true that Classical Arabic -or “fus7ha”- is still quite a “cold” language that is perceived to be distant from people’s everyday lives and certainly not suitable for a tech meeting. But I’ve a little hope after this meeting, that a certain kind of “medium or standard dialect” (“zammieh”) can be developed by each Arab country in order to be understood by the others.

Egyptian is widely understood by everybody not because it is easy (!) but because it has been “the” language of mass communication in the Arab world for many years. And now Syrian and Lebanese are widely understood because of TV.

I think that, despite the fact that they are harder to understand, even Tunisian and other North-African dialects could be more popular thru media in the future. They just have to be used, instead of using French (!). I believe that the beautiful Arabic language should be enhanced thru new digital media, but in its local lively versions -together with the Classical “official” one. I hope that meetings like this could push people to speak more Arabic, learn more Arabic and produce more content in Arabic.”

(see <http://mediaoriente.com/tag/beirut/> for the full blogpost).”

Egyptian blogger Ahmad Gharbia, in a video interview with Global Voices’ David Sasaki, discussed the technical challenges of using the Arabic language on the internet, as it is unclear and ambiguous when used for technical terminology. One word is used to convey several meanings, which causes confusion in manuals. As Ahmad says, “The creation of new words to deal with the daily torrent of technical words that need to be clarified is a tedious job.” The open source software⁶ and fonts available for Arab script are not enough, as users get bored of them quickly. This lack, according to Ahmad, is strange for a language in which calligraphy is considered an art. Ahmad is part of Arab Techies⁷, a group which is trying to rectify this lack by designing fonts and, most importantly, documenting the methodology.

⁶ Open source software is software whose code is provided under a software license which allows users to study, change, and improve the software.

⁷ Arab Techies (<http://arabtechies.net/>) is a gathering of Arab digital activists, citizen journalists, media aggregators and social web portal managers, which aims to promote techies’ support and engagement with community-based projects and initiatives.

⁸ Tactical Tech (<http://www.tacticaltech.org/>) is an international NGO which helps human rights activists use information, communication and digital technologies to enhance their advocacy.

Ahmad also spoke about the challenges of translating Tactical Tech’s⁸ booklet ‘Security

Funding and Foreign Agendas

Nasser Weddady & Ramsey Tesdell



Mauritanian blogger Nasser Weddady and Ramsey Tesdell organized a discussion on foreign funding and blogging which touched on many sensitive issues. As blogging has developed and matured, funding opportunities for activist blogging have also risen. But “taking money from the West” is one of the most frequent arguments used by political authorities against activists. Bloggers themselves are also concerned with submitting their content to the interests and priorities of foreign donors. The discussion therefore raised the following question: How can Arab bloggers financially sustain their blogging activities without jeopardizing their content? Is the issue at stake the geographic source of the funding? Or is it foreign government funding? And should bloggers really care whether or not they are attacked for taking foreign funding?

The first issue discussed was the importance of funding for activism. Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas for example has never received any funding whatsoever, except for a digital camera that a Kefaya⁹ supporter donated to him. Wael ran his blog with no external money until 2007 and then began to put sponsored ads and Google ads to generate a small income. However, Wael is constantly accused of being paid to support a foreign agenda against Egypt.

@waelabbas: I now have an advertiser for \$1,000 a year on my blog. I have nothing against advertising #ab09

2:47 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from TweetDeck

@waelabbas: Used to get \$100 each few months from Google ads #ab09

2:47 AM Dec 11th, 2009 from TweetDeck

These accusations were fueled when he received two American awards, the Journalism Award by the International Center for Journalists and the Human Rights Watch's Hellman/Hammet Award. Even though he is aware that such accusations are baseless and aim only to damage his reputation and credibility, Wael still recommends that activists do not take international funding.

Participants were asked whether they would rather accept money from the European Union (EU) than from the United States (U.S) government, or whether they would accept money from Arab governments rather than Western ones. There seemed to be a consensus on not taking money from U.S. governmental agencies, such as USAID or OTI. Some argued that taking money from the EU is ethical since the EU is politically closer to the benefits of the Arab people, and because their policies are not as restrictive to activists' work as USAID is. A contrary argument was that the EU, as well as the U.S, is a supporter of oppressive regimes and would not ultimately make an effort to push regimes on human rights issues.

Many training and information sessions concentrated on online security and gave advice to bloggers on how to protect themselves from harmful online attacks. Iraqi blogger Ma'moun Al-Rasoul for example warned that if some consider their content not important enough to be hacked, then they are operating under a false impression. Hacking in fact is not just about obtaining sensitive information from people, but includes diverse practices such as getting login information to use an account without a person's permission; using recording devices (webcam, microphone, etc.); viewing a person's computer screen; taking control of an Internet Protocol (IP) address, or taking over a computer all together.

The goals can also be diverse. Hackers may target certain people specifically, to steal money from their bank account, spy on their activities and correspondences, or bring down their website. But there are also hackers who hack into accounts or computers in order to use a person's identity as part of a bigger plan, either to use internet bandwidth for free, or turn an IP into a zombie that they control to attack others.

Online Security for Bloggers

Jacob Applebaum & Ma'moun Al-Rasoul



Another session was conducted by the U.S. internet security specialist Jacob Applebaum, on the TOR Project, an open network which helps users protect themselves against online breaches of privacy and personal freedom. He also held many sessions on digital security.

Essential Skills for Blogging

Noha Atef, Rasheed Jankari, Wael Abbas & Hanadi Traifeh



AB09 in many ways sought to build confidence in Arab bloggers and show them that they do not need advanced skills in writing and photography, for example, to run an excellent blog. The power of blogging is precisely that it is technically easy to start a blog and maintain it at minimum or no financial cost. Several of the more experienced bloggers at AB09 imparted much advice on essential blogging skills to less experienced participants, often warning them, for example, that excessive blogposts can undermine the purpose of a blog. As Egyptian blogger Noha Atef pointed out, quantity does not automatically imply quality. Atef also stressed that visitors, though necessary, are not sufficient alone to uphold a blog's reputation. She directed the audience's attention to many websites that have a large number of visitors but no essential message to convey.

She also warned against the tendency to veer off topic and in the process lose readers. Useful tips were given which focused mainly on the tools for attracting readers, such as using links, pictures, various fonts, creative caricatures, and even sarcasm or personal input when appropriate. The final message seemed to be that bloggers are required to be personal and connect with their readers rather than remain formal and distant.

⁹ Kefaya (meaning 'enough' in Arabic) is the moniker of the Egyptian Movement of Change grassroots movement opposed to the government of Husni Mubarak and his plans to transfer power to his son Gamal.

Writing Techniques for Bloggers

Moroccan blogger Rasheed Jankari ran a training session on writing techniques for bloggers. He advised participants to always do background reading on their topics in order to form an objective opinion and to develop sound analysis. A blogger should begin with the main headlines and fundamental idea and then provide more details, taking care to be concise with the information in order to focus on the main idea. This process resembles an inverted pyramid: the large base at the top includes general ideas, while further down the pyramid the idea becomes more focused. In blogging, introductions are usually eschewed in favour of the main piece of information. For informational political blogs, the final opinion is only added at the end of the articles. Articles should not exceed 500 words and should also include images and audio files if available. (For more information about useful techniques, Rasheed advised participants to visit www.dangillnor.com.)

Making Videos and Photography

Videos and photographs are an essential component of any successful blog, because they are powerful tools of not just communication but also serve to consolidate a blogpost's written content.

"We can all make videos." This was Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas's main message during one workshop. "If you have a camera (even if it is built into a phone), then you can record video footage. If you have a computer, then you have the software to edit that footage. If you have internet access, then you can upload it to the rest of the world." Wael explained the basic techniques of how to edit footage using Windows Movie Maker, introducing necessary features: intro, fade-



My mobile camera is my best friend in Iraq, it is helping for publishing photos on my Blog. @hamzoz said. #aboz

about 2 hours ago from web

Reply Retweet



mbaa
Muhammad Basheer

in/fade-out, adding a soundtrack and text, etc.

In a hands-on basic photography skills workshop, Syrian blogger Hanadi Traifeh shared her knowledge of photography. She gave technical

information on lighting, frames, etc., as well as advising bloggers to keep it simple by not adding too many pictures to their blogposts.

Participants left both sessions feeling empowered by the mere thought that regardless of their technical knowledge, or lack of it, they too can produce videos and take good photographs.

A key concern of many participants was how to ensure that their blogs reached the biggest audience possible; several presentations and training sessions tackled this often difficult issue.

Online Promotion

Sudanese Thinker, Anas Tawileh, Mohammad Bachir, Malek Al Khadraoui



Sudanese Thinker gave a presentation on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) which is a series of tools and techniques to ensure that websites and blogsites feature in the first 10 search results of search engines, Google in particular. In other words, it is the process of adapting a webpage so that search engines (such as Google or Yahoo for example) will easily detect it. In short, it helps a blogger attract an audience. The idea is to populate blogposts with keywords that search engines will detect. As a result, the page would appear higher on search lists when users search for the keyword in question.

Sudanese Thinker emphasized that it is important to keep in mind that the keywords chosen should be what people are searching for, not what a blogger wants people to search for. Before choosing keywords to emphasize, a blogger should study his/her target audience's interest. They can for example visit adwords.google.com and compare the different keywords that their target audience might be looking for. Once keywords are identified, bloggers should make an effort to include them extensively in the URL of their site/blog, in the titles of their blogposts, in the beginning of paragraphs, etc. But Sudanese Thinker advises: be careful and smart. First of all, bloggers should not compromise the quality of their content for the sake of keyword frequency. In addition, Google can, and will, detect unreasonable repetition of keywords and in that case will consider certain bloggers as spammers.

SEO is important for two reasons. First of all, it helps a user to passively direct traffic to their webpage. SEO is also important in shaping public opinion. The average internet user, when searching for a certain keyword, will not go further than the first page of results. The first few links that appear are therefore crucial in shaping the viewer's initial perceptions. This is called the "SEO War." According to Sudanese Thinker, "this is also the reason why we, as Arabs, need to take over the first Google page when it comes to our issues and keywords if we want to change the way the world population perceives us."

Users should also stick to the keyword they have specified and ensure that it is mentioned at the beginning of the first sentence of their blogpost. Sudanese Thinker advised trying to get incoming links (links that refer back to the user's website) by, for example, leaving comments in forums, blog and news outlets that somehow link back to their own websites. He also reminded users not to forget to monitor their traffic and, most importantly, the keywords that are attracting traffic. (For a detailed blogpost please see: <http://www.arabloggers.com/2009/12/14/arabic-bloggers-forum-in-beirut-how-to-make-your-blog-url-on-google-search-first-page/>)

Target Audiences

Syrian social media expert Anas Tawileh gave a complementary training on target audiences and how to identify them. He reminded participants that the internet provides us with many new, cheap tools that bloggers can use to distribute their message to the largest number of people. As a result, it is difficult to get people's attention online, and it's even harder to keep it. Hence the importance of defining our target audience to make sure we reach the people that would be interested in reading our work.

The first step, Anas advised, is building the profile of a typical reader. For example, is the blog's audience mainly male or female? How old are they? What social class do they belong to and therefore how frequent is their internet access? What are their hobbies and interests? What language(s) do they use to browse online? What is their literacy level? What is their geographic location?

Once a blogger has the general profile of their target reader, they can select communication channels accordingly. For example, if their target

is the Middle East, then they should think more of Facebook, because of its great popularity, and not Twitter, which has very limited popularity. Throughout the process bloggers also need to define clear, measurable metrics upon which to evaluate their success. And performance needs to be monitored regularly, in order to adapt strategies.



Facebook and Twitter

Facebook and Twitter are very important social media mediums for online promotion and campaigning. Syrian Mohammad Bachir shared his knowledge of Twitter, the most popular micro-blogging social network in the world, and how to utilize it to gather information or promote articles. Mohammad also spoke about Twitter lists, a new feature allowing users to create user lists and add other users that they believe are relevant to this list. Then users can follow these lists, or can check lists to find new like-minded people to follow, thus creating an online community around a certain topic.¹⁰

Facebook ads and Google ads

Facebook ads and Google ads are also a good alternative means of online promotion. Moroccan blogger Malek Al-Khadraoui shared his experience with the Yezzi.org campaign. As the campaign had only a small budget, the organizers could not invest funds in advertising and instead chose to buy Google and Facebook ads. These alternative services are significantly cheaper than traditional advertisement. In addition, with Facebook ads users can choose the audience they want to target with their ads. With Google ads on the other hand, certain keywords can be targeted. Therefore, by combining the two together, a very wide but relevant audience can be reached. Malek also explained technically how these ads can strategically be used to provide adequate and affordable access to a target audience, especially since Google provides these ads for a reduced price to non-governmental organizations.

¹⁰ For example, users can group together activists from Sudan who are using Twitter, or election observers from Iraq.

Campaigns and Initiatives by the participants

Eman Abdel Rahman, Wissam Salibi, Jillian C. York, Hisham Khribchi, Abdelrahman Hassan, Anas Tawileh, Mohammad Bachir, Ahmad Gharbia

Kolena Leila



Eman Abdel Rahman from Egypt introduced the "Kolena Leila" ("We all are Leila") initiative which was launched in 2006 to encourage individuals to discuss women's issues in the Arab world. "Kolena Leila" aims to encourage rethinking stereotypes and give every "Leila" the opportunity to express herself.

On September 9, 2006, the initiative, which lasted for a day and included mainly Egyptian women, managed to mobilize seventy blogs and produce 100 posts approximately. By the end of the one-day-event, reactions ranged from sympathy to personal attacks.

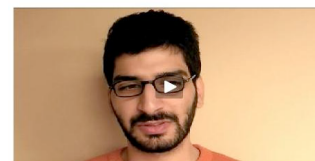
Through trial and error, "Kolena Leila" matured and attracted media attention. The initiative now includes men and women from 25 Arab countries divided into groups. "Kolena Leila" also thrives on giving voice to those who have no online presence.

In the discussion that followed the presentation, participants were interested in knowing more about the impact "Kolena Leila" had and its ability to lead effectively to social change. Eman emphasized the fact that "Kolena Leila" does not commit to changing the situation on the ground, but to open the door and encourage dialog. This led to another discussion about the complementary nature of the relationship between digital activism and activism on the ground. Some also noted that digital activism can sometimes be the only possible way to operate, and that mobilizing does not necessarily occur on the streets. Moreover, instead of criticizing digital activism one must examine governmental policies vis-à-vis digital activism to comprehend the impact of these tools.

Ethiopian Suicides

Lebanese blogger Wissam Salibi decided to start his blog, grimly titled Ethiopian Suicides, after he noticed that in less than two weeks in October 2009, 4 Ethiopian maids working in Lebanese homes had committed suicide, and that these deaths received only minimal local media coverage. The blog focuses on the plight of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon who are often mistreated by their employers, with little access to justice and no respect for their human rights. As Wissam said, "Migrant domestic workers should be treated humanely and protected from racist and abusive employers. Maybe then they will stop committing suicide."

Interview with Wissam of Ethiopian Suicides
By David Sasaki • December 14, 2009 • Filed in: Interview, Video
Tags: Activists, Campaign, Cyber-Activism, Migrant Rights



Video Interview conducted by David Sasaki at: <http://www.arabloggers.com/2009/12/14/interview-with-wissam-of-ethiopian-suicides/>

Herdict



U.S. blogger Jillian C. York presented Herdict, which is an online initiative that collects information about blocked websites around the world. Herdict relies on crowdsourcing information about censorship around the world. Over time and with contributions from users around the world, Herdict intends to provide a reliable map of censorship around the world.

The information collected is available for free for users. You can visit the "Discover" page of the website to see the situation in a certain country, or the places where a certain webpage is blocked. You can also sign up to receive updates about a certain webpage or country. Herdict also has a discussion board where users can provide more information about a certain webpage that is blocked, or ask for details about certain webpages.

Talk Morocco



Talk Morocco (www.talkmorocco.com) is a new initiative that was launched a few days before the Second Arab Bloggers Meeting, bringing together the North African blogosphere to help connect it to the rest of the world. Hisham Khribchi, one of the founders of the website, discussed the website's objectives and what they hope it to achieve. When Mohammad VI ascended the Moroccan throne in 1999, a new era began during which society seemed to be opening up; an independent press was encouraged and internet penetration increased. However, according to Hisham, the promise of a more democratic and free society was broken. Only two years after the new king came to power, censorship and harassment of journalists began.

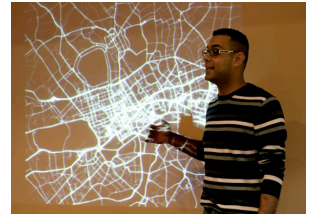
With bloggers breaking the news in Morocco, authorities began to crack down on all online activities. The first prisoner was a young Moroccan man who created a fake Facebook account for the King. Recently, Le Monde magazine published a poll in which 91% of the Moroccan population expressed their satisfaction with the King. These results were apparently not good enough and the magazine was banned. In response, Anas, a blogger, created a simple avatar called "Je suis 9%", and soon many Moroccans and non-Moroccans did the same and the Blogosphere was invaded by small "Je suis 9%" avatars, in a clear statement of what Moroccans thought of the crackdown on the magazine.

As the project matures, it will be mirrored in Arabic, English, and French. For the time being, all essays are translated into English, regardless of their original language. Hisham talked about the issue of language, emphasizing the fact that the Moroccan blogosphere included five languages (Arabic, French, English, Berber, and Spanish). The French language, however, is dominant; a post-colonial characteristic that is also observed in many other countries. This also means that the blogosphere is more dependent on the French media. Hisham for example gets more Moroccan news from the French press than the Arab press. Participants put emphasis on the Arabic language

and encouraged MoroccoTalk to reflect more on this.

Open Street Map

Abdelrahman Hassan is a leading contributor to Open Street Map (OSM), a Wikipedia-like alternative to Google Maps based in Cairo, Egypt. By definition, Open Street Map is exactly like Wikipedia, as only contributors can enter geographic information. People collect geographic points using their GPS devices, and convert them into tracks which are then uploaded and made accessible for everyone.



The obvious question is: Why Open Street Map when Google Maps exists? First of all, Google Maps is not really free and maps cannot be altered freely. If a user wanted to use and manipulate a map, s/he does not have access to the raw data required (in vector format), but only an image of the map that s/he can view; publishing, printing, or editing are not permitted. Moreover, cities evolve and change, and mapping companies are too slow to update their maps. After the Katrina floods, for example, Google Maps kept showing a bridge that was destroyed, and aid efforts using Google Maps were slowed down until Google was contacted directly to correct this. When the bridge was rebuilt, it took Google Maps four months to include this. In short, commercial companies cannot cope with the constant changes in landscape. It is only people who use these maps that are capable of making these changes. Open Mapping is about democratizing information, and thus it is a lot like blogging. Just as Blogs weaken the monopoly of major media outlets, open mapping can weaken the monopoly of mapping companies.

OpenStreetMap relies mainly on data submitted by mappers and enthusiasts that submit tracks, street names, as well as points of interest. In some cases, data was donated from governmental bodies or mapping companies. Yahoo offered its satellite imagery data to OpenStreetMap users. In Egypt, for example, GPS devices are illegal, so most mappers rely on satellite imagery to acquire accurate and verifiable data.

Meedan

Syrian Anas Tawileh began by comparing “new media” to the “old” or traditional media. He also termed the internet as “social media” because of the active interaction between the writer and the visitor who is also an active user as opposed to a passive one in traditional media. In the latter, economics play a central role in distribution, whereas in new media content has become more easily accessible.

The subject of Arab users versus Arab content was also brought up in an effort to address “the great wall of language”, i.e., the language barrier between non-foreign language speaking Arab users and foreign language content.

Anas is one of the founders of Meedan.net which is best described as a ‘digital towns square’ (Meedan means “town square” or “gather place” in Arabic). Meedan’s innovation is proposing a layer lying above the web, which translates any given content from Arabic to English and vice versa. The translator will allow a non-English speaking audience to intelligibly understand various web content which they may not have been able to access previously, as well as communicate with other non-Arab speaking users. This layer will be provided for by a “translation machine”, the product of which will be reviewed by a group of translators. The concept has been termed “shared translation”. The translation memory will help improve the translation machine and help the web on its way to becoming a “translingual” one.

An audience member then asked if the translation system itself was something similar to Google translation. Anas denied any connection made between his potential project and that of Google, claiming that the inclusion of actual translators in the project will provide the vital difference.

@anastaw: speaks of a beautiful concept: @meedan aims at creating "trans-lingual web" #abog
27 minutes ago from HootSuite



Hisham_G
Hisham

Jazeera Talk

Mohammad Bashir discussed JazeeraTalk as a site for blogging and sharing opinions were blogging takes the shape of corresponding. The blogger becomes a correspondent according to the subject s/he covers. Moreover, correspondents themselves become bloggers as they



express their opinions on the news, rather than reporting the news objectively. Indeed, one of the main features of the website is the diversity of the individuals involved and topics tackled. The website currently has 185 correspondents and has published over 4800 reports.

One of the main objectives of JazeeraTalk, if not the main one, is to promote the idea that people can create, change and influence their environment. JazeeraTalk is crucial in the role it fulfills, as the culture of blogging is recent in the Arab world. The website is not censored and correspondents are free in the choice of topics and tonality. The website was blocked in Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

During the Q&A section, there was a long debate on the relationship between Al-Jazeera Television and JazeeraTalk, with several participants insisting that since the latter uses the former's Logo and name, then a direct relationship cannot be denied, and, therefore, JazeeraTalk cannot claim independence from Al-Jazeera. Others were curious about the source of JazeeraTalk's funding. Muhammad replied that JazeeraTalk is completely independent from Al-Jazeera Television, and that they are only related when it comes to the logo and sharing experiences.

Creative Commons

Creative Commons (CC) is a non-profit organization headquartered in San Francisco, United States, devoted to expanding the range of creative works available for others to build upon legally and to share.

CC is a new license that redefines the relationship between creative authors and those who enjoy their work. Instead of the traditional “all rights reserved,” license authors can choose to publish their work under different licenses which selectively preserve or give away certain intellectual rights.

CC establishes a clearly defined framework of using other people's work which eventually catalyses more creation and reduces conflict over the introduction of copyright laws in the region, as well as reducing tension between content producers and re-users. The organization has released several copyright-licenses known as CC licenses for free to the public. These licenses allow creators to communicate which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of recipients or other creators.



According to Egyptian blogger Ahmad Gharbia, the media has a tendency to control creativity, in an effort to monopolize the monetization process. Traditionally, everyone who publishes material owns it. Such intellectual properties were relatively easy to protect in the traditional media, as it was easy to take credit for work.

An important feature of blogging is re-blogging or quoting. Bloggers, unlike journalists and writers, don't just broadcast their work to the masses, but they also interact with readers and other bloggers; they are part of a Blogosphere. Many bloggers quote other blogs or newspapers which they either use to introduce a certain topic, to offer criticism, or to highlight an opinion with which they agree or disagree. In Egypt for example, where bloggers have become credible sources of information, major newspapers started quoting blogs. Some made reference to the authors, while others published without attribution.

It was therefore important to efficiently establish what privileges the author wishes to give away and which ones to keep. The different CC licenses allow an author to keep or give away most of his/her intellectual rights, and the only right that cannot be given away is attribution. In all licenses, the user is requested to mention the original author of the work. For example, the Lebanese comic magazine Samandal (<http://www.samandal.org>) publishes all work under CC licenses. This means that anyone is free to use visuals, mash them up, remix them and republish them, thus enlarging the creativity circle and promoting it.

Ahmad reminded everyone that the idea behind CC is sharing, not restricting.

Closing Session: Screening of '10 Tactics for turning information into action'

Marcin Gajewski

AB09 closed with the screening of the documentary "10 Tactics for turning information into action", produced by the Tactical Technology Collective (<http://www.tacticaltech.org/>), a UK-based NGO which helps human rights activists use communications and digital technologies to maximize the impact of their work. Polish photographer and video-maker Marcin Gajewski, who participated in AB09 and ran several workshops, filmed, edited, and narrated "10 Tactics."

The 50-minute film includes 10 info-activism stories from around the world, each used to demonstrate a particular tactic, such as "visualize your message" or "witness and record." The film can be viewed at www.informationactivism.org.

Towards AB11: Looking to the future of the Arab Blogosphere

As mentioned in the introduction, this report is just a sample of the flurry of activity that occurred during ABO9. The informal structure of the meeting encouraged multiple bilateral trainings and discussions, forging alliances and networks which remain strong on Facebook and Twitter, and in particular solidarity campaigns for detained bloggers. For many participants who had been reading each other's blogs for years, the event connected them to real people behind the digital personalities.

At the time of writing this report, the situation for bloggers in the Arab world appears grim; prominent Egyptian blogger and ABO9 participant Wael Abbas, faced a 3-year jail sentence for "sabotage" on February 19, 2010, which was luckily overturned; Jordan's high appeal court has issued a decision extending the print and publication law to cover internet content (see <http://opennet.net/blog/2010/01/jordan-apply-press-law-digital-content> by Jillian York for more details), and Moroccan bloggers are increasingly being arrested and charged for various offenses (see for example <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2009/12/15/moroccan-blogger-internet-cafe-owner-sentenced/>).

ABO9 highlighted the needs of the Arab blogosphere, the challenges it faces, as well as opportunities for the future. For organizers and participants alike, the offline and physical encounter of Arab digital activists was hugely inspiring and confirmed the significance of such meetings. By listening to each other's narratives, exchanging knowledge and expertise they unleashed the vitality to tackle the problems they face.

Although the bloggers who participated in the meeting are aware that blogging will not by itself change the human rights situation in the Arab world, the blogosphere is in many countries the only space where activism can flourish. Due to the fact that journalists are victims of censorship and intimidation, bloggers are increasingly playing the

role of freedom of expression watchdog in Arab countries.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation and Global Voices Online are convinced that it is important to further support the initiatives of the Arab Blogosphere, to strengthen their impact on the society, and widen their approach. The discussions and debates during ABO9 demonstrated that Arab bloggers know what they require in terms of development and support. However, the Arab Blogosphere also faces the challenge of maintaining its independence and thus its credibility in the face of the readers and international donors and organizations who are trying to influence the media development field in the Middle East.

The policy of the Heinrich Böll Foundation and Global Voices has always been to respect the independence of its partners; hence the unconventional format of ABO9 which instilled a sense of common ownership of the event, will hopefully be the model for future work with the Arab blogosphere.

We also hope that future events will bridge the gap between online and offline activism, as many bloggers are also involved in street activism and use online technology to spread information. As Egyptian blogger (and co-founder of Arab Techies) Manal Hassan says: online activism is not enough. Bloggers need to have a connection to the street, as well as other "offline" citizens who are not connected to the internet. Online activism is very popular with people who are educated and are comfortable with English, but they need to build a bridge with street activism.¹¹

The Heinrich Böll Foundation intends to continue its support of the Arab Blogosphere with a follow-up event in 2011 ('AB11') in partnership with Global Voices. Both organizations are together looking forward to be engaged in a field that promises to make heard silenced voices and add diversity to the field of information and activism.

¹¹ See <http://www.arabloggers.com/2009/12/09/interview-with-manal-hassan/>

